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## **ICSEI 2007**

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### **Autonomy and accountability: the cross-hierarchical School Improvement Group in schools 'facing exceptionally challenging circumstances'**

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#### **Abstract**

The potential benefits of a cross-hierarchical school staff group to engineer change in a school have long been recognised. For the work of such a group to be successful, there needs to be belief in the advantages of both collective and shared leadership, and a concomitant relinquishing of control. However, the benefits which a School Improvement Group (SIG) can bring are usually premised on stability in the circumstances of the school and the instability brought about by the 'challenging circumstances' faced by schools in poor neighbourhoods affects the long-term sustainability of such a group. This paper draws on evidence from a school improvement project involving eight schools 'facing exceptionally challenging circumstances' to suggest that there are serious obstacles to the development of a school improvement group in situations of institutional instability and external pressure.

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# Autonomy and accountability: the cross-hierarchical School Improvement Group in schools 'facing exceptionally challenging circumstances'

Jane Cullen and Sue Swaffield

## **The school improvement group**

A 'school improvement group' (SIG) and its associated nomenclature ('development group' or 'research and development group' for example) consists of a group of the teaching staff in a school working across departments and faculties, who act as evaluators of practice and promoters of change. It is a model of improvement that is neither 'bottom up' nor 'top down', but may rather be described as 'middle out' since its influence is designed to flow upwards to senior leadership as well as 'down' to individual classroom level. A key characteristic of such a 'cadre group' is that its members co-ordinate development activities, involving many more colleagues in the process and so gaining wide involvement and support for the changes it is instigating. Typically, the group includes staff teaching across a range of subjects and with a variety of academic and pastoral roles, and leadership of the group need not necessarily be taken by someone with a formal leadership role in the school. So, an important feature of such a group is that, in theory at least, it cuts across the usual hierarchical patterns of leadership in schools in England and its democratic make-up is instrumental in its success.

The idea of the school improvement group as an engine for change and a major lever for professional learning can be traced back to the James Report (DES, 1972). The core of the rationale is that effective professional learning is school-based rather than merely school-focused and is linked explicitly to particular development goals. These ideas found expression in a variety of forms, including the Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA) initiative that originated in the 1990s at the University of Cambridge (Hopkins et al., 1996) and subsequently became a private company. IQEA with its model of cadre groups can be seen as a forerunner of the SIG model of improvement, and the SIG bears some similarity to its predecessor.

This paper considers the establishment and operation of SIGs in schools which did not previously have such a group. The specific focus of the paper is improvement

groups in schools which are located in poor neighbourhoods, with toxic cocktails of 'exceptionally challenging circumstances', where stability in the schools cannot be taken for granted, high levels of staff and student mobility are the norm, and there is pressure from central government to improve external examination results dramatically and quickly.

The next section outlines the project that was the context of the study, and then follows a discussion of the constitution of SIGs with particular reference to autonomy and accountability. Subsequent sections consider SIG training, development, operation, impact, obstacles and sustainability.

### **Background: The schools in the project**

The DfES funded and organised a school improvement pilot project that ran between 2001 and 2004; in the event the project was effectively operational from 2002, with the first year being used for 'setting up'. Eight 'schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances' (SFECC) were involved, and the project was known as the 'SFECC' or the 'Octet' project. The schools were chosen on the basis of the following criteria:

- 15% or fewer of the students were achieving 5 A\* to C at GCSE
- 40% or more were eligible for free school meals
- 39% or more were assessed as having special education needs
- The schools had been assessed as having good or better management in their most recent Ofsted inspection.

The eight schools are all urban schools and provide the project with a geographical spread. Two are located in London, The Phoenix School in Hammersmith and Whitefield in Barnet. The Channel School is in Folkestone, an example of a coastal town with high levels of deprivation; Pennywell School is in Sunderland, formerly home to mining and shipbuilding industries, and Halifax, a town with an industrial history of textiles and engineering, is the location for The Ridings School. Havelock School is located in Grimsby, a town experiencing the effects of the decline of the fishing industry. The two other schools, St Albans and Champion High School are in Birmingham and Liverpool respectively, both examples of great nineteenth and twentieth century industrial centres repositioning themselves as cultural centres for the twenty-first century, but which nevertheless contain pockets of the worst deprivation in the country.

## **The challenging circumstances of the communities**

The eight schools in the SFECC project are characterised by some or all of the indicators of economic and social disenfranchisement and lack of social capital. For those that are located in areas where there was formerly a strong manufacturing and heavy industry base, there was at one time a secure future for young people, particularly young men with many jobs requiring only basic skills and with traditional craft-based apprenticeships. Over the last 20 to 30 years, cities such as Halifax and Sunderland have struggled to attract equal levels of light industry and service based employment and such work as there exists is often casual. Maritime communities such as Grimsby, Folkestone and even Liverpool have suffered as shipping and fishing industries have invested in economies of scale and increased automation. Particular areas in large cities such as Birmingham and London register highest on the indices of deprivation (ODPM 2004) and show complex historical patterns of decline. Areas in both these two major cities are also home to highly transient populations, including people drawn to the casual work possibilities of a major urban centre, asylum seekers and refugees in temporary accommodation and others leaving troubled domestic and social situations behind.

Five of the SFECC schools (Pennywell School, The Channel School, Havelock School, The Ridings School and Champion School) draw from a very local parent/student community. In the Ridings School, for example, 95 per cent of students walk to school. All five of these schools are located in mono-ethnic white wards. By contrast three (Phoenix, St Albans and Whitefield) draw from a scattered and highly transient multi-ethnic community. In 2001, for example, at Phoenix School, there were 50 different nationalities represented and 50 languages and of those who sat the GCSE examination in 2000, less than 40 per cent spent the whole of their secondary education in the school (Ofsted report 2001). Employment patterns also differ. For example, adult unemployment rates in four of the SFECC school wards (small local government areas) which are mono-ethnic vary between 5.7% for The Ridings and 6.8% for Havelock, almost twice the national average, and a high proportion (between 30% and 43%) of adults have no qualifications. In the ward which contains The Channel School in Folkestone, 20% of the population are out of work if this figure includes 18.2% who are classified as having 'a limiting long-term illness'. In the area closest to Pennywell School, exceptionally high rates of unemployment were reported in 2000, with up to 47% of adults unemployed for at least the preceding 12 months (SRB3 Programme Review). 65% of Pennywell residents had no qualifications while just under 30% of residents had poor levels of literacy and only 18% thought that education would

be of any use in finding work (DfES NLC case study). By contrast, Whitefield School has unemployment figures (3.7%) in line with the national average and in the local area in which it is located (Golders Green) 39.9% of residents are educated to degree level or higher (as opposed to a national average of 19.8%).

On the housing estate in which Pennywell School is located, there is so much crime and fear of crime that there is a dedicated police post with both a Senior and a Junior Task Force. A new police station was built in 2004 in the centre of the Havelock School's catchment area. For the Ridings School there has been the opposite problem. From 1994 until 2003, in an area which has a population of 20,000 and high crime rates, there were no dedicated police officers (prior to 1994 there had been five) and from 2004 there was one officer per ward. Crime statistics in the areas in which the SFECC project schools are located are generally higher than average. In Liverpool for example, robbery and vehicle theft are between twice and three times national averages; in Grimsby, burglary is twice the national average. In Halifax, the local district (Calderdale) Crime and Disorder Audit 2001 reported that the areas with the highest crime rates, including violent crime, were highest in the wards served by the school. In Folkestone, 53% of all crime committed in its local district (Shepway) takes place in six 6 wards in Central/East Folkestone (Crime and Disorder Strategy 2002/2005), which includes the ward in which The Channel School is located.

### **The terms of the SFECC Project and its evaluation**

Each school received £200,000 in direct funding each year for three years. In addition, the DfES funded and organised:

- Establishment and training of a school improvement group (SIG)
- Training for middle managers in each school, including training as mentors to other subject leaders
- Development of ICT in the schools, including the introduction of interactive whiteboards in classrooms, the development of a school database for student tracking and target-setting and video-conferencing among the eight schools
- The introduction of a phonics based reading programme in Year 7

The main measure of success of the SFECC project, insofar as the DfES was concerned, was increased attainment at GCSE. In 2000, secondary schools in England had been set a series of stepped floor targets for a school's minimum

performance at GCSE. The minimum targets were set at 20% for 2004 and 25% for 2006. As these eight schools were invited into the project on the basis of having 15% or fewer students with 5 A\*-C at GCSE, and as it was made quite clear to the schools that they were expected to improve in line with the floor targets, they had from the outset a heavy burden of accountability for short term examination success.

The evaluation of the SFECC project was conducted by a team from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, running concurrently with the project. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the research, and data collection included multiple extended visits to each of the schools, observation of the training programmes, analysis of performance data, questionnaires, and interviews with DfES officials and community members. The evaluation of the entire project is reported in *Schools on the Edge* (MacBeath et al., 2007).

It was in the context of pressure for improvement and a prescribed training programme that the SIGs were constituted in the eight SFECC Project schools and their work evaluated.

### **The constitution of SIGs: the tensions of autonomy and accountability**

Within a broadly common model of a SIG across the 8 schools there was variation regarding the membership of the group and the links to the senior leadership team. SIGs in SFECC schools ranged in size from five to nine and it was typical for members to be drawn widely from across the staff. In Whitefield School for example, seven departments were represented on the group which included members whose experience was in the pastoral curriculum and in special educational needs, something the SIG viewed as enhancing its impact. At The Ridings School it was a matter of principle that all subject areas were represented on the SIG.

Ensuring broad representation and appropriate membership required strategic steerage. Some of the headteachers in the project described the process as one of staff volunteering, but typically there was a guiding hand behind the scenes. The headteacher at The Ridings School, for example, carefully selected as candidates for inclusion in the SIG people she regarded as instrumental in influencing others. As important as breadth of experience was range in length of experience; at Pennywell School for example the SIG comprised a cross-section of staff including some with many years of experience at the school through to newly arrived staff,

and from middle and senior managers to newly qualified teachers. A significant number of SIG members across the schools were young and relatively inexperienced teachers who were given an opportunity to have a say and to exercise leadership. While there were attempts in some schools to use SIG membership to bring forward 'weaker' members of staff, on the whole the SIG seemed to derive its credibility and strength from the membership of effective, well-regarded members of staff.

There is always the danger of any such group being seen as favoured or an elite and this was true in at least one school in the early phase. The group may develop a strong internal social capital and benefit from the bonding that such a group is able to achieve but there is a danger that impact can easily be lost if changes appear to be the province of a small group of key teachers. The ownership of change may come to be seen as invested in this group rather than the province of the whole staff. The challenge is to be aware of the dangers of bonding and exclusivity and to consider how to move towards the alternative concept of 'social bridging' (Putnam, 2000) through which capital is multiplied among other members of school staff. This is where astute leadership and critical friendship can help to support the spread the capital and help those at the leading edge to lay the path for others.

So, a potential tension which affected the SFECC SIGs was the extent to which SIG membership was confined to what were seen as 'key staff', many of whom were also being given staff development through other strands of the SFECC project and/or who held significant, for example middle management, staff roles in the schools. In St Albans School, for example, six members of the SIG group also received the middle management training. In Pennywell School, four of the SIG group also were middle-management trained, the SIG Chair was trained in the reading programme and one was involved in the whiteboard training. Two staff members at Phoenix School were on the SIG, and had attended the middle management training. Staff from the SIGs at Havelock and Champion School were also whiteboard-trained and middle management trained. There are clearly potential advantages of focusing professional development more intensively on a particular group of staff but this has to be weighed against the denial of opportunity for capacity building across a school staff – and it is this democratic capacity building which is a key features of a SIG.

Innovation and learning... are fostered within small groups and flat, networked, horizontally differentiated structures rather than bureaucratic, hierarchical, vertically differentiated structures. (Morrison, 2002)



The success of a SIG is dependent partly on the freedoms it is given to run outside the formal professional structures and lines of management of the school, but conversely the extent to which it is supported by the senior leadership team.

Headteachers are confronted by a heightened dilemma: their greater dependence on colleagues disposes them towards sharing leadership. In a context of unprecedented accountability, however, they may be inhibited from sharing because it could backfire should empowered colleagues act in ways that generate poor standards of pupil achievement, alienate parents and governors, attract negative media attention or incur inspectors' criticism.

(Wallace 2001:157)

The creation and development of a successful SIG depends on the endorsement by the leadership team of its autonomy – its capacity to make decisions and instigate change. The benefits are the breadth and depth of support that SIG-inspired change can command among the professional staff of a school. The disadvantages can be a decision-making process that has ambiguous accountability. There are potential tensions in such a model. One way of resolving them is to involve the SLT in the SIG, though is not necessarily a straightforward solution - the democratic nature of the SIG can be very reason for its success.

Though the linkage to the senior leadership team was realised in different ways in the SFECC schools, it was described by all involved as critical for the SIGs successful functioning and influence. In seven of the schools there was a permanent SLT presence in the SIG. St Albans School initially chose not to include an SLT member but to have the group report directly to the headteacher; however this created tensions in the SLT and by the end of the project an Assistant Headteacher had been co-opted onto the project. The Ridings did not have a member of SLT on the SIG but the sole Deputy Headteacher was an interested and supportive associate member. Clearly there is a balance to be struck between the perceived need to allow the SIG the scope to be creative and proactive whilst also being responsive to the strategic direction of the senior leaders. In The Channel School, the new Headteacher became directly involved in leading the work of the group but after nine months decided that it would be productive to step back and let the group be more self-directed. The choice of the chair was seen by some as critical, while others were happy with a looser structure and at least one SIG, for some of the project, had no chair.

On a more pragmatic level but equally importantly, the success of the SIG depends on practical resources available in school: the group needs common time to meet and plan activities; it needs to be able to command school resources such as ICT equipment and it may need a budget. In other words, the endorsement of the SIG by the senior leadership team cannot be abstract; such a group needs concrete support in the way the school is organised - timetabling for meetings, money and materials. There were potential tensions here. At Pennywell School for example, the SIG had to meet before school began; at Whitefield School on the other hand, the timetable was organised around the SFECC project with meeting time funded (for example for cover and supply staff) by the project.

### **The SIG training**

The training of the SIG groups in the eight schools took place on six separate two day residential sessions spread across two years. A core of the same five or six trainers was used, including a headteacher from a school in similar challenging circumstances and a member of a local authority advisory and inspection service. The training team was led by Paul Clarke of IQEA Ltd and Alma Harris from the University of Warwick.

The training consisted of a mix of workshops run by the trainers, interspersed with sessions in which school groups fed back to the others on development activities undertaken since the last residential. There were also sessions in which each SIG focused on activities to take back to school and feed into its own school improvement agenda. The training was not cumulative through a prescribed series of modules, but rather a series of workshops covering a range of topics were offered at each residential. The workshops covered:

- Effective teaching
- Inductive teaching
- The use of data to inform teaching and learning
- Monitoring for learning
- Assessment for Learning
- Use of Media
- Raising self esteem
- The emotionally intelligent school
- Mind mapping
- Cooperative group work
- Interactive word games

- Circle Time
- Changing/modifying behaviour

The coherent and regular SIG training programme proved to be a powerful factor in sustaining development over the life of the DFES project. Equally influential was the strategy of connecting the SIG training with specific aspects of the improvement of each individual school, that is of each SIG choosing from the menu, specific workshops which would feed into their current school needs for development, and then taking back the workshop-content for school based implementation, evaluation, reflection and further planning. The idea of returning for a subsequent training session occasion to feed back to other SIGs and to be stimulated by new ideas was seen by participants as particularly important. As one SIG member from Campion School said:

It's like Alcoholics Anonymous it's like you go there with your shared problems.... and then people give you these different ideas and you go back .... And then you trial them and you take risks and you know most of the time these things work ... and then you come back and you say yeah well that was good it worked ... and then new ideas come on....

Continuity within the core group of trainers and opportunities for socialising over the two days of each training event helped to forge social and emotional bonds among teachers and trainers that fostered both energy and enthusiasm. The opportunities at the training sessions for each school group to work by itself encouraged collegiality and teamwork within a group of staff from different departments who in general had previously not known each other well nor worked together.

The training was also collaborative in that ideas for the forthcoming residential sessions were discussed, and the SIG members made decisions within a given framework about the focus for future workshops. The two main organisers of the training also visited the schools during the two years to receive feedback about the SIGs' progress. In these senses, the training was progressive and cumulative.

### **The development of SIGs as 'engines of change'**

Characteristic of the SIG model is that the focus of its work is determined by the needs of the particular school, but the process of agenda setting differed across the

eight schools. For example, priorities were shaped by HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectors) or OFSTED visits, by the head, in association with professional development planning, or from reflections and analysis by the SIG itself.

In several of the SFECC project schools the SIG was constructed more as a staff training unit with responsibility for most of the professional development activities in the school. In others the work of the SIG was also focussed on the coordination of policy development and evaluation activities. An example of the latter would be the coordination of a behaviour management policy at the Ridings School and at St Albans. The use of data, particularly the Cognitive Aptitude Test (CAT) learning styles data, to inform teaching and learning was a central concern for all of the SIGs. At Whitefield School for example, they used these data to support teachers in addressing the needs of all pupils. Whatever the particular emphasis, it was predominantly the case that the intervention of the SIG led to some kind of classroom experimentation, monitoring and feedback focussed on teaching and learning, sometimes involving additional formalised data gathering.

At its most effective, the SIG was seen as a major 'engine of change' in the school, with regular and frequent interventions. At Whitefield School the SIG's activities were coordinated with the introduction of additional, weekly departmental meetings focussed on the improvement agenda. At Campion School the SIG worked with all departments and at Channel School the SIG led weekly training sessions focussed on classroom practice. In at least two of the other schools the SIG took over responsibility for staff training. At both Havelock School and the Ridings School it was felt that the SIG had been central to the development of the school; for example, at the Ridings it coordinated the development of a behaviour policy which involved almost all members of staff in its construction. From the beginning of the SFECC project, the fact that so many of the SIG group at St Albans School were also middle managers made it a highly respected and influential group. Their first staff in-service training (INSET), delivered after only one SIG training session and focusing on staff social bonding as well as peer group observation, was acclaimed as a success by colleagues. A teacher at Havelock said that the INSET provided by the SIG at her school was the most meaningful in terms of its agenda and mode of delivery that she had experienced in her twenty years there. Another teacher at the same school found it 'inspirational'. These comments were typical.

The SIGs also had a significant impact on those who were members. The experience provided a collegial source of support which appears to have led to increased self-confidence, a sense of belonging and enhanced teacher

professionalism. Teachers talked of feelings of being 'part of something bigger'. One young member of a SIG said after the group had led a weekend conference, 'I now feel a part of the school'.

### **The extent and depth of impact**

The effectiveness of the SIGs may be considered in the terms of the extent to which innovations permeated across the whole school, the depth of impact on teachers' understanding and classroom practice and the sustainability of the group and its work.

Staff who were not members of the SIG provided varying perspectives on its permeation across the school. The fact that in at least two of the project schools, staff training was wholly in the hands of the SIG group over the main years of the DFES project, provided one measure of the penetration of the SIG initiative. Another measure was the extent to which SIG activity was known within each school. In interviews conducted across the eight schools in the final year of the project with focus groups of staff who had not been part of any SFECC training, the SIG group activity came up most regularly as the strand of the project which had affected them.

There are far fewer staff out on courses. Most of the INSET is taken by SIG members and this is very good as the training is tailored to our needs. The quality of this INSET has been very high. It has improved tremendously.

(Teacher, The Ridings School)

However, with regard to depth of impact on learning and teaching, even by the end of the project it was premature to make judgements given the short time that the SIGs had been in existence and the realistic extent of their influence. The evidence from SIG members and others suggested that changes involved a rather surface adoption of classroom practices such as icebreakers, plenaries, the three/four part lesson, objectives on the board, use of CATs data and a learning styles matrix.

In the last HMI report, it did say that starters are now used in the majority of lessons. So that's widespread. You know, people didn't do starters before and I think that's had an impact because the kids come in and they're focused and they can see that we're in here to learn.

(SIG member, SFECC School)

There are implications here not only for further professional development within the SIG but more widely within the school. A longer term vision is to support teachers in moving beyond supportive routines to a more challenging evidence-led pedagogy, perhaps for instance to begin to problematise a fast developing orthodoxy around 'learning styles'.

It is not possible to establish a causal chain that links the work of the SIGs to outcomes in terms of measured attainment. Judgements as to the impact of the SIG appeal to different kinds of evidence and proxy measures of impact. However, it is possible to claim for example that, overall, raised awareness of learning and learning styles within SIGs led to effective dissemination of practice throughout the schools. Changes in classroom practice had been embedded to some extent through support and monitoring and there was evidence by the end of the project of a greater variety of learning experiences in lessons and greater engagement of students in their learning.

## **Obstacles and setbacks**

### *Withdrawal training*

Within a broad positive response to the professional development opportunities afforded by SFECC a number of issues arose in discussion with school staff and with members of the professional development teams. All of the training sessions took place outside the school and in many cases staff had to travel long distances and spend significant time away from the school and their home life. A concern shared by all of the schools was their capacity in such challenging circumstances to send teachers out of the school for regular or protracted periods. This withdrawal model of training is not ideally suited to the circumstances of these schools and, as headteachers frequently indicated there are significant social as well as economic costs involved. Finding sufficient supply teachers does not solve the problems as many are neither of the highest quality nor able to adjust to the demands of 'difficult' students. In some cases steps were taken to deal with these issues. In Whitefield, for example, permanent supply staff were appointed to provide the capacity for other staff to be absent and a school closure day was given over to the embedding of the training across school staff.

Such initiatives helped to alleviate the problems but could not entirely address the issues raised in schools where continuity, and in particular continuity of support for students, are of critical importance.

It's an issue that the week before GCSEs exams started, four members of staff are out. You have got to question the timing of that... you know I missed two GCSE geography classes.

(SIG member, Pennywell School )

These issues can be even more acute in small schools. In St Albans for example, training, although fully supported by the staff, was not without its difficulties. 'Good teachers' were regularly absent from classes and this had repercussion on the school and on students. When these teachers were regularly away, there were perceptions of a deterioration particularly in terms of student behaviour, and consequently learning. The 'good teachers' themselves were aware of regularly missing the same, sometimes key classes.

In addition, the SIG training was often on Thursday and Fridays, which are difficult days at the end of the week and as the teachers from the eight schools taken out for the training tended to be the more experienced or capable staff, this meant key people being out of the school at significant times. This resulted in absenteeism from the training events and was a source of some tension between schools, the providers and the DfES. The numbers of SIG group members from the eight schools varied at each training session, and regularly one school or another was absent from a session. Numbers of teachers varied between approximately 30 and 40 per session. Two of the SFECC schools, Phoenix School and The Channel School were much less involved in the regular, collaborative SIG training programme than the other six though they had some bespoke SIG training delivered on site. They still rated the success of their SIG as significant. This may suggest that the extent and regularity of external training is not a critical factor and that schools with appropriate leadership, a sense of ownership, imagination, and access to good ideas, are able to take forward initiatives on their own with equal effect. It might also suggest that other factors are involved, including other external resources which these two schools drew on to develop their school improvement groups.

While these might be thought of as concerns specific to this project, there are wider implications for the nature and format of training that is appropriate for schools facing challenging circumstances.

*Staff mobility*

Staff mobility and its consequences was an abiding concern in the SFECC schools throughout the project. The lack of stability in staffing encompassed changes in headteacher in three of the eight schools, and some changes were multiple ones, (for example The Channel School had three Acting Headteachers in the first eighteen months of the project). There were multiple changes in the make up of senior leadership teams across the eight schools as well as significant changes in heads of department, and a notable lack of key senior and middle managers across the eight schools in the three years of the project. This not only affected the way that SIGs could be run, and inevitably compromised their effectiveness, but actually called into question whether it is possible in the long-term to run an effective SIG in a school where there is chronic instability in the staff. In the planning of the SFECC project, the likely consequences of staff instability were not addressed or incorporated into the ways that the strands of the project were set up, and with the training and development of the SIGs, the trainers only ever addressed the issue in an ad hoc manner (for example by providing the bespoke training for Channel and Phoenix).

SFECC schools are those most in need of a full staffing complement, but they bear the brunt of what had been termed a 'crisis' in recruitment and retention of teachers. The issue is a national one. The Select Committee on Education and Employment's Ninth Report to Parliament (1998) expressed serious concern over the repercussions of failure to attract people into the teaching. The variation in recruitment from school to school throws into sharp relief the differential attractiveness of jobs in different parts of the country and in varying locations. Despite various initiatives the problem remains. The House of Common Select Committee on Education and Skills, reporting in 2004, remarked:

High turnover, and the inability of some schools to recruit sufficient high calibre teachers, has a knock on effect on the achievement of pupils in those schools. Turnover within the profession may not be a significant issue for schools in general; but for those schools in the most challenging circumstances it can exacerbate an already difficult situation.

(HC 2004:16)

A detailed example from one of the eight schools illustrates the seriousness of staffing shortages. In The Ridings School in 2002-2003, ten staff left at the end of the year and there had been a 33% staff turnover during that school year. In September 2003, the school had unfilled posts for a Deputy Headteacher, a second in the maths department, a head of dance/drama, a head of music and a head of



food technology. These posts were still unfilled a year later. Two of the teaching staff at September 2003 were graduate trainees on the Graduate Teacher Trainee Programme, one of whom left during the autumn term. During the school year 2003-2004, eight out of 44 teaching staff left during the course of the year (18%) and six of their replacements joined on temporary contracts. English and maths were both department in a state of flux losing permanent staff during 2002-2003 who were replaced by fixed term teachers. The following year, in maths, the temporary GTTP teacher left in the autumn term 2003, followed by a maths teaching assistant in Term 2. A temporary maths teacher began in the Autumn term and another maths teacher began in the spring term. Two English teachers left in the autumn and spring term, and were replaced by two graduate trainees.

The biggest pressure at the moment is that of getting and keeping staff. Staff vacancies sometimes get no applicants ... but management structures and evaluation structures etc are of little use if, you haven't got living breathing exciting people in front of youngsters. Good teachers are the key to it all.

(Headteacher, Pennywell School)

The turnover of SIG members of staff was significant in several of the eight schools. The Channel School found it difficult to maintain a full SIG group over 3 years, and had just two key members who were significant over the length of the project. The SIG group at Pennywell School went through several incarnations over the course of two years. The chair of the first year left at Christmas for a promoted post in another school and after a hiatus, the chair of the second year took maternity leave and a promoted post in another school. On the other hand, in some schools a certain turnover – say of one or two members - did not affect the strength of the group or was in fact some ways positive.

#### *The implications of staff instability for a SIG*

The potential effects of staff instability on a SIG group can be summarised as follows. Within the SIG group itself, if there is major turnover then it can become difficult for the group to act as a coordinated unit. If the group has to reconstitute itself too frequently its previous store of collective knowledge and know-how is in danger of becoming lost, the impetus of particular initiatives is lost and it spends too much time in regrouping and refocusing. If the SIG group lacks sufficient numbers over an extended period and if there are continued difficulties in making up a complete SIG group, it is more difficult for it to have impact across a large

number of staff; and it may suffer from staff perception that it is marginal and unimportant.

Instability in the SLT, and in particular changes of headteacher are bound to affect a SIG. The SIG has to re-establish the relationship with a new headteacher and re-develop the way that the SIG is allowed to work in the school. The fact that the SIG, by its very nature, is an unconventional grouping working outside the norms of usual lines of hierarchy makes it almost inevitable that its role is open to scrutiny, and quite possible that there will be suspicion and a lack of understanding. If misunderstandings continue, any autonomy it enjoys would inevitably need to be re-negotiated, and very possibly its accountability would increase.

Instability across the teaching staff in general makes the development work of the SIG extremely difficult. Any school has the problem of inducting new staff into the ways of working in a school and involving them in recent developments and changes, but when there is a constant overload of new staff, significant numbers of supply staff, short-term staff, and staff arriving and leaving throughout the year, then staff development – of the kind that permeates across the school and is embedded in teaching practice in every classroom – becomes a massive undertaking.

A further danger was expressed by one SIG trained teacher who said that while the project has been a “fabulous CPD opportunity” it “makes us very attractive to other schools”. She added that everyone who was leaving at the end of the school year was moving on to promoted posts elsewhere.

#### *Pressures for short-term performance results*

All schools, and schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances in particular are under, are under constant pressure to demonstrate rapid and continuous improving performance as measured by a narrow set of indicators. The schools in the SFECC project were under even greater pressure, experiencing not only the ‘normal’ demands of Ofsted inspections and scrutiny of results (in the media as well as in professional for a), but also additional HMI monitoring associated with the SFECC project. While it is possible to find ways of improving results in the short term, and this has benefits for the students concerned and for the immediate portrayal of the school, sustained improvement is much more difficult to achieve, and some of the approaches adopted for short term gain may be counter productive in the long run. As Sergiovanni (2001) observes, ‘Sometimes

what they [schools] are forced to do in the short term jeopardizes their long-term capacity' (p116).

The three improvement approaches identified by Gray and his colleagues (tactical, strategic and capacity-building) are all to be found in these eight schools. Under pressure to demonstrate the raised attainment sought by the DfES (the proportion of students gaining 5 A\*-C at GCSE), headteachers and teachers readily admitted to tactical measures to improve test scores both in the interests of the longer term survival of the school as well as for the instrumental benefit of the individual student. Simply raising test scores for those on the borderline was at the same time recognised by headteachers and teachers as limiting and to the detriment of those students in whom investment of time and effort was likely to pay less visible dividends. Coincident with tactical measures, there was evidence of strategic approaches at certain times and for certain purposes and a desire to build capacity in the face of discontinuity and turbulence.

### **Long term sustainability**

A defining characteristic which all the schools in the project share is the volatility and turbulence of their communities. These have a deep impact on the internal culture of the schools and manifest themselves in many aspects of school and classroom life, the most significant of which is the transient nature of one or more of the three key sets of participants - students, their parents and teachers. Improvement relies on a minimal level of stability for growth to occur and a resilience embedded deep enough in both structures and culture for the organisation to supersede the effects of transient populations. This is what is understood by *capacity building* and is the precondition of sustainability once external support and intervention have been withdrawn.

Longitudinal school improvement research is still the exception with Maden's 2001 study *Success Against the Odds* one of the few studies that have revisited schools after a considerable period, in that case five years. Fink (1999) and Hargreaves (2004 ) have studied sustainability over a period of time and found attrition to be more a characteristic feature of schools than an ability to maintain commitment in the face of external challenge and imperatives of change. Drawing on a retrospective study covering thirty years, Hargreaves (2004) suggests seven sustainability factors:

1. **Creates and sustains learning.** Focuses on learning that matters, that is lasting and engages students intellectually, socially and emotionally.
2. **Secures success over time.** Ensures succession by building capacity, grooming others and 'letting go'.
3. **Sustains the leadership of others.** Distributes leadership and provides opportunities for others to exercise initiative.
4. **Addresses issues of social justice.** Recognises that schools are interconnected and does not seek to improve itself at the expense of others.
5. **Develops rather than depletes material resources.** Careful husbanding of resources and nurturing of talent comes from collaboration rather than competition.
6. **Develops environmental diversity and capacity.** Standardisation is the enemy of diversity because different and challenging practice is the root of growth.
7. **Undertakes activist engagement with the environment.** Impacting on the local and wider environment requires confidence in asserting values.

These seven factors are as applicable to schools in exceptional challenging circumstances as they are elsewhere, and probably more so. Creating capacity involves sustained cooperative energy and this has implications for nurturing innovative forms of leadership. It is only through capacity-building that schools may have confidence in sustaining improvement.

## **Conclusions**

Our evaluation suggests to us that although the SIG was the most successful aspect of the SFECC project across the eight schools, the training model of the SIG adopted was a flawed one. Though we admired and gave testimony to the strong bonds that were forged within each SIG group and between SIG groups and trainers over the two years of the SIG training, we believe that a more lasting impact in these circumstances of exceptional challenge would have been achieved by a training model which paid much more attention not to training the present cadre group itself, but to developing their skills as trainers of a cadre group back at the school. This would have had the twin benefits of a self sufficiency built into the SIG model – ie that from its outset a group was developing its own autonomy and building towards its own sustainability post-funding; and that rather than being trained in what were some rather superficial teaching strategies (ice-breakers, plenaries etc) from a set menu offered by the trainers, it was from the

outset, being trained to develop and deliver its own agenda, not simply linked to but actually arising out of its own school development goals.

In the SFECC project where the funding was withdrawn at the end of three years, one challenge for the SIGs was to continue the level of engagement and enthusiasm without the benefit of external support and training. Another was the extent to which the SIGs would be able to move on from the short-term goals of transferring training and ideas generated within the specific remit of the SFECC project training, to a situation in which they could generate their own agenda. A third and widespread challenge was to retain staff who had been trained and through that opportunity had enhanced their expertise and 'marketability'. In the context of schools that already suffered crippling problems with the retention of staff, it is important to be critical about the extent to which staff development has provided an improved professional environment in the school and encouraged staff to stay, or alternatively the extent to which this has made them more attractive for promoted posts in other schools.

The conclusion that SIGs were a salient success is supported by interview data from all sectors within the eight schools, including those members of staff with only peripheral knowledge of, or involvement in, the project. In a volatile environment with high staff mobility the challenge as the SFECC project came to an end was for the SIGs to be self-renewing and self-generating engines of improvement.

There was not a great deal of evidence to suggest that this was likely to happen.

With an evaluation model tied to the same limited time period as the intervention project we are not in a position to report on the long term life and effects of the SIGs, nor their continuing engagement with issues of autonomy and authority.

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